

**“WE ARE A GENEROUS COUNTY”
REMARKS OF COUNCILMEMBER GEORGE L. LEVENTHAL
AT THE THRESHOLD SERVICES ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
MEETING AND DINNER
JUNE 23, 2003**

Let me begin by thanking Threshold Services, its Board of Directors, and its Executive Director Craig Knoll for the outstanding service that you provide to people in need. I know that a couple of years ago, you were facing dire financial straits, but you didn't quit. The need for your services is so great and the county would have had an ever bigger problem on its hands if you had not stuck with us. So thank you so much for that.

I feel very fortunate to serve as Chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee. Among the reasons I ran for County Council was to make sure that government helps those who need help the most. There is no better place to fulfill that mission than the HHS Committee. From prenatal care for poor mothers, to caring for children who are neglected or abused, to looking out for developmentally disabled and autistic youth and adults who cannot care for themselves, to providing in-home aides to help the needy elderly bathe, dress, shop or cook - county government provides an extraordinary support system for our most vulnerable residents.

We are a generous county. Of course, there are limits to how far our budget will go. Nevertheless, I am consistently impressed with the willingness of county government and our county's residents to look after those of our neighbors who are most in need. I am constantly learning about county government programs that are not provided anywhere else in the state. For example, no other county in Maryland provides such substantial operating assistance to mental health clinics. There are many more examples where Montgomery County is taking the lead in health and human services programs. I am so proud to live in this county and serve in its government.

And when it comes to generosity and concern for those who need the most help from government, I am especially fortunate to serve on the HHS Committee with my colleagues Tom Perez and Steve Silverman. You could not ask for three councilmembers who are more committed to meeting the needs of all Montgomery County residents.

Shortly after taking office, I articulated four priorities that I wanted to place high on the HHS Committee's agenda: 1 – Child care; 2 – Access to Health care; 3 – Homelessness; and 4 – Mental Health. Let me briefly address all four.

Regarding child care, we will be looking at the regulations implementing the Working Parents Assistance program – which provides subsidies for working parents to access child care – to see whether we may be creating barriers that prevent parents from benefiting from the program. Over the longer term, I also want to look at what we can do to make it easier for all parents (not just low-income parents) to get information about the availability of safe, reliable child care in their area. Also, I want to look at how we are training and supporting child care professionals, who play a critical role in the early development of our kids.

Regarding access to health care, I have been working hard to expand our system of community clinics that directly serve county residents without health insurance. If you listen to the national debate over health care, you might think it was a lack of insurance that leads people to emergency rooms, which in turn, contributes to the spiraling costs of health care for all Americans. Since being elected to the County Council and serving as chairman of the HHS Committee, I've begun to see these issues through a different prism. In Montgomery County, I believe the immediate issue is access to care, not access to insurance. By supporting our community clinics, we bypass the health insurance industry and its expensive and frustrating bureaucracy altogether. In the future, I also want to look at ways in which we can access insurance for those who are priced out of the insurance market. Perhaps the county can serve as a catalyst for the creation of a larger risk pool so that uninsured individuals can obtain insurance at more affordable premium rates – whether through the existing health insurance that we offer to county employees or through other means.

Regarding homelessness, I will be working with the Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee to develop a strategy for the establishment of more transitional living quarters, like the Econo Lodge in Gaithersburg which was recently purchased by the county. These transitional quarters provide homeless people with a short-term living situation where they can re-establish their dignity and begin getting their lives together, eventually graduating out of government assistance altogether. This is one of many examples where, as much as possible, we

must identify social service programs that will provide a ladder of opportunity. Wherever we can, we should be helping people who need government assistance to get to a place where they don't need the help any more.

Homelessness directly correlates to my fourth issue, mental health. The homeless are among those county residents who intersect with the county social services "system" in multiple ways – including mental illness and substance abuse. As you may know, I recently requested that the County Council's Office of Legislative Oversight study the range of services we provide to adults who are dually diagnosed with a substance abuse disorder and serious mental illness. We need to ensure that our service delivery systems communicate with each other and that as much as possible we are identifying individual strategies that enable clients to improve their circumstances, not linger forever in the dark night of dependence and delusion. We expect to receive the OLO's report early this summer. I will look forward to working with Threshold Services on this issue of cooccurring disorders, which I know is a specialty area of yours.

We are working to advance the agenda recommended to the Council in 2002 by the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Mental Health. We want to move away from the fee-for-service system to a case rate model that will enable us to take a more holistic approach to individual clients' needs. We must continue to demand that the state provide more support for mental health facilities, because the county cannot do it alone. But we will continue to provide direct support for clinics in the county – which, as I said earlier, is another example of our county stepping up to a responsibility that is above and beyond the responsibility taken by any other county in Maryland. In fiscal 2004, the county will appropriate a total of \$600,000 in direct aid to mental health clinics. The good news is that there is not another Chestnut Lodge on the near horizon. As far as we know, no other clinics are on the verge of shutting down and we want to make sure that none are faced with that.

And finally, regarding mental health, let me say that one way or another, we are going to pay. We are going to provide mental health services up front in clinics or we are going to provide them in jail. The Department of Corrections has unfortunately become our county's mental health provider – and our substance abuse services provider – of last resort. Our conscience demands that we turn this around. If we can save even one person from going to jail unnecessarily, it will be money well spent.

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak with you tonight and I will be happy to take any questions.